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INSPIRATION IN FRESHMAN COMPOSITION

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Whenever I am asked the usual academic question, "And what do you teach?" the same thing happens.

"English," I reply.

"Ah, yes, English. You have courses in literature?"

"No," say I, "composition."

"Oh! [Could I but indicate the difference between that "Oh" and the "Ah" that preceded it!] You teach composition? I imagine some of the advanced courses are quite interesting?"

And when I meet this well-meant bit of encouraging comment with the bald statement that I teach only the required Freshman composition, my interlocutor relapses into silence. He is full of pity, but the situation baffles.

Just why it is that those of us who teach the English-composition course required of Freshmen in all, or nearly all, our American colleges should be considered too stupid or too unfortunate to have secured berths in the literature section of the English work or in the advanced courses in composition has for years been a mystery to me. Why people in general and college communities in particular should look down upon anyone who prefers to teach Freshman English as a person of low mentality and attainments, devoid of ambition and unworthy of promotion, is another mystery to me. This attitude, however, is so powerful a factor in academic circles that one gets its reflection even from students. "I'll be so glad to have an elective course in English next year, where I'll be sure to get a good teacher. In the required work, of course, you have to take the riff-raff," says a keen young Freshman, so alert to the public opinion about her that she is quite blind to the fact that her instructor in the required course is one of the best in the university. And, "Hasn't Mr. S——— been advanced to any of the higher

courses yet? Too bad; he seems such a promising young man," laments the associate professor of something-or-other.

Now my sentiments on this subject are different, entirely different. They are analogous to those of the country boy who drove me in a tough little Ford over a rocky, steep, wood road last June. "A Ford is just the car for this rough country," I remarked affably. "Huh, Huh!" he replied, with a sniff sufficient to blast the pretensions of the entire non-Ford motor world. "These is the only kinda cars they is made, anyway." That's the way I feel about Freshman composition. It's the "only kinda composition they is."

Why? Because it is so fundamental, and because it comes first. It deals with a subject-matter which should win and hold the respect and love of every English-speaking boy and girl, but which, if wrongly or indifferently presented, will win dislike and indifference. The Freshman comes to college open-minded; he will take what he finds, and by it he will be molded. His tastes, his interests, his conceptions, and his habits of work will all grow, to a great extent, out of what he receives during his impressionable Freshman year. If his college course is to teach him then, among other things, to love his mother-tongue and treat it with some respect, to care for law and order and the beauty of form in language, to reject the ugliness of lawlessness and confusion, to desire and work for the ability to think and to express his thoughts clearly to his fellows, then let his college look well to that despised course, English Composition 1. Any course which teaches the application of law to the chief means of expression known to man is vitally important. The course which teaches this to Freshmen full of enthusiastic eagerness for what college may have to give them is fundamental. There's no question about it—Freshman composition is the only kind of composition there is.

Committed as I am to this doctrine, I look with amazement at the words of the "Gentle Theme-Reader" in the *Atlantic Monthly* for May of last year:

A man who is bent over a task wholly devoid of compensation . . . who has no time to indulge in hopes, had he any to entertain. He is the theme-reader. . . . Could you talk to a college Freshman for—let us be

generous—six minutes, you would realize the horror of his task. And yet a Freshman's talk is somewhat removed from banality by the eagerness which invests it. His writing is not so choicely arrayed. No boyish enthusiasm lifts his thoughts to the skies. . . . They tramp heavy shod over roads macadamized with platitudes. . . . A Freshman leaves no subject . . . without the imprint of his personality. . . . But his personality has itself been impressed—with a die used uniformly on all his fellows.

If this is the writer's idea of Freshmen, no wonder he sheds rhetorical tears in the rear pages of the *Atlantic*. My idea of Freshmen is, like my views on English 1, entirely different. Perhaps the trouble with the "Gentle Theme-Reader" is that he talked with his Freshmen for only six minutes. I have been talking with mine for ten years.

There are two ways of teaching. One is to sit behind a desk and pass out across its top and down to the patient ranks below a certain content of information. This method must be followed, wholly or in part, in the teaching of certain subjects. English composition is not one of these subjects. It demands the other method, that method whereby several meet in the market place and exchange ideas on the state of the crops, the beauty of the autumn foliage, and the value or the pity of this and that and the other in the world. A class in Freshman composition is such a meeting-place. If the teacher knows how to draw out and guide the flow of ideas and the comment, how to suggest the this-and-that-and-the-other, he will find no "solemn and staid thoughts tramping" across his classroom or across his themes. Nor will the personalities of his students be all impressed by the one die. And, not least important, he himself will escape the danger of being, as a wise man said to me not long ago anent the teaching profession, "twenty years behind his students."

Much is said and written and done nowadays about "arousing the interest of the student." In composition courses unusual subject-matter, practical, vocational subject-matter, and various original methods of presentation of subject-matter are devised in the effort to make theme-writing interesting. Piffle, most of it. The teacher who has learned his students need resort to no such devices. What we want is a method by which to arouse the student's appetite, not for tempting wedges of custard pie, but for good,

wholesome, plain bread and butter. How? By convincing him that bread and butter is good for him. Not, by any means, the stereotyped, nursemaidish, "Now, Johnny, eat your cereal; it's good for you." No didactic, dogmatic statements will avail. We must touch the vital springs of youth, appeal to youth's sense of values, if we are to make youth care. There lies the secret—to *make youth care*. All of us always find time and energy for the things that we really want to do. Every boy or girl in school or college lives two lives—the "academic" life and his own life—real life—in which he does, of his own will, those things which seem to his young spirit really valuable. There are some of his school tasks which cannot be made a part of his own spontaneous life; some lessons which he must learn, humped up at his desk in durance vile, far from the thrilling world of his own interests; for youth, left to itself, would never include discipline in its joyous curriculum. The writing of themes for college composition courses, however, is not entirely a disciplinary task. It demands some measure of interest, of inspiration, if it is not to justify the contentions of the "Gentle Theme-Reader." And in order that it may have these indispensable adjuncts it must inevitably partake of the writer's own life. Somehow or other we must make theme-writing one of the things which youth looks upon as really valuable. Nor is this an impossible task when once we realize the innate seriousness and idealism of normal youth; its deep concern about this business of life into which it is entering; its eager desire, under whatever mask of indifference or frivolity, to do a good job in the world. We can usually trust youth to work with faithfulness and enthusiasm at any task so long as we who impose the task show that by means of its faithful performance its doer is made more fit to meet the demands of real life.

Experience, of course, is the only means by which a teacher of composition may find out how to accomplish this. My experience has revealed to me one way of enlisting the enthusiastic support of Freshman classes in their required theme-writing—to show them the part which the laws of composition play in all life, and, having shown it to them, to make them realize how their lives depend, for success or failure, upon their ability to understand, to use in their

handling of their own thinking processes, and to apply to their own individual life-problems, these same laws.

Thus Huxley stated in general terms the fundamental duty of education:

Yet it is a very plain and elementary truth that the life, the fortune, and the happiness of every one of us and, more or less, of those who are connected with us do depend upon our knowing something of the rules of a game which has been played for untold ages. . . . Well, what I mean by education is learning the rules of this mighty game. In other words, education is the training of the intellect in the laws of nature, under which name I include not only things and their forces, but men and their ways; and the fashioning of the affections and of the will into an earnest and loving desire to move in harmony with those laws.¹

Dr. Partridge² makes a more specific analysis. "The personal problem of each individual" he calls this necessity which is laid upon every human being of understanding and applying the laws to which his being is subject; and he maintains throughout his book that this is the "whole problem of education." Education must train the individual, he says in substance, to meet the complex demands of modern life in such a way as to avoid undue nervous strain and loss of balance and the evils these bring upon the individual and society.

Always there is some degree of mental disorder. Experience is never organized with ideal completeness. To overcome this is essentially a work of education. It is preventative. The mind must be trained by being organized. Interests must be ordered so that the lesser contribute to the greater, and there is a balance among them, and the mind may bring order out of the confusion of experiences and stimuli which assail it. To be normal, one must have a mental organization in which interests all have their proper places and do not conflict with one another. . . . This is essentially the educational problem.³

Organization, balance, order out of confusion—the very language of the English-composition classroom and conference, but applied here to the everyday life of the individual. If we show our students this, make them realize that in writing themes where mental confusion due to new and difficult subject-matter is changed, by the

¹Thomas Huxley, "A Liberal Education and Where to Find It," *Science and Education*, p. 83.

²Partridge, G. E., *The Nervous Life*.

³*Ibid.*, pp. 55, 56.

process of organization, into mental order—given centrality and connection and balance—they are actually working with a process whereby the “mind may bring order out of the confusion of experiences and stimuli that assail it,” their interest in theme-writing will not be wanting. I do not wish to be understood as saying that the English-composition course is a place for the teaching of pseudopsychology. No bungling attempts at a popular explanation of scientific truth should, of course, be attempted for a moment. The only point touched is that of the vital connection between the writing of exposition and the living of life. This matter of the living of life should, it goes without saying, be stressed in all departments of education. “In all work and all education the worker should be in touch with the distant sources of interest, else he is being trained to slavery, not to self-government and self-respect,” says Dr. Cabot.¹

For illustration of this application of the laws of composition to the life of the individual one need not seek beyond the college community. No teacher but has met and wept over numberless cases of unorganized student days and years; of wasted and dissipated energy; of uncentralized effort. In a women’s college particularly, where Service is spelled with a capital and its function in the undergraduate years—the preparation time for future usefulness—is not always clearly understood by conscientious applicants for social ministry, such examples are legion. Such college careers embody all the errors in unity, coherence, and emphasis which adorn the amateur paragraph or expository theme. Could anything be more pat than the analogy between the college career of, say, Mary Jane Smith and the following paragraph from a Freshman theme?

Stevenson’s life naturally affected Stevenson’s writing, and the element which was perhaps the greatest factor in developing the universality of the man’s work was his extensive travels. We have seen that he lived a very wandering life; in visiting so many countries and coming into contact with so many people, he gained a knowledge of the world and of humanity which was of inestimable value to him as a writer. In many cases his travels furnished directly the material for his books. Notable examples of this are *An Inland Voyage* and *Travels with a Donkey*, material for which was gathered during

¹ Richard C. Cabot, “The Call of the Sob,” *Atlantic Monthly*, November, 1913.

trips on the Continent; and *The Amateur Emigrant*, *Across the Plains*, and *Silverado Squatters*, all three the fruit of his journey to, and experiences in, California. Most of his travels were prescribed by his doctors, and their frequency indicates the precarious state of his health throughout his life. Many people living under the physical conditions which attended Stevenson would have permitted their bodily weakness to make its imprint upon their mental state, and the consequent tone of their utterances would have been melancholy and bereft of all joy in living. Stevenson's "optimism, his gay courage, his habit of accepting the world as very well worth living in and looking at" have, on the contrary, inspired his writing. And "it is a fact that the note of morbid sensibility is so absent from his pages, they contain so little reference to infirmity and suffering that we feel that a trick has been played upon us on discovering by accident the actual state of the case with the writer, who has indulged in the most enthusiastic allusions to the joys of existence." Another noteworthy characteristic of the man was his retainment of youth. In regard to this it has been said that "perhaps the first quality in Mr. Stevenson's works . . . which strikes a reader is his buoyancy, the survival of the child in him"; and again that "the part of life he cared for most is youth, and the direct expression of the love of youth is the beginning and the end of his message." *The Child's Garden of Verse* is an immortal proof of this in him, as are also *Treasure Island* and others of his stories of adventure.

The paragraph wanders far from its topic, the influence of Stevenson's travels upon his work. So likewise Mary Jane Smith.

Mary Jane came to college with a central idea based on a belief in the truth of the statement that "the function of the university is intellect." She had exceptional brains, and the ambition to train them toward a definite end—child education and welfare. She had a high notion of women's function in society, and she planned to supplement her strong, instinctive love of children and to train herself for future motherhood or public service by a thoroughly informed and disciplined mind. During her Freshman year she studied hard and enthusiastically, as her growing mental grasp and alertness testified. She kept clear of most of the "non-academic activities," though she gave herself reasonable recreation and made several good friends. So far she, like the paragraph, stuck to the main point. Early in her Sophomore year her interest in child welfare induced her to yield to the importunities of the college settlement chapter in her institution to take a class of Italian children. After a while the people in the settlement under whose auspices the class was held, recognizing her unusual ability, enlisted

her aid in arousing the interest of her college in a strong movement against a local form of child labor. Her investigations in this connection revealed certain conditions which, she became convinced, could only be reached through the women's vote. She became the president of her college's equal suffrage league. Toward the end of her Junior year I found her one day, covered with butter and salad dressing; she was making sandwiches—hundreds and hundreds of sandwiches—to be sold to hungry students, as they came out of eleven o'clock classes, for the benefit of the Children's Convalescent Home. She looked tired to death and confided to me that she was "so driven with work that she never had a minute to study—all her college work was hopelessly sloppy and superficial"—and that "college was so disappointing; you rushed and rushed trying to get everything done, but you never seemed to arrive anywhere."

Both Mary Jane Smith and the paragraph on Stevenson observed in their mad careers to some degree the principle of coherence: each of their decentralized ideas and activities grew out of the one immediately preceding it. But unity, balance, harmonious progress toward a central aim, with each part kept in its proper relation and doing its proper service to the whole—these were ignored. They are, alas, ignored in too many human lives as well as in too many Freshman paragraphs. The penalty for an incoherent paragraph—a low mark in a record book—makes some impression on a student's mind. It will, however, make more impression on her mind if her attention is called to the analogy between the incoherence of paragraphs and the incoherence of lives. Mary Jane Smith got a low mark in the University of Life, where she might have rendered such distinguished service. She never fulfilled her early promise; her family said that college had spoiled her. But college experience, like life experience, is never organized; the college student cannot expect, nor does she want, a boarding-school régime. She must work out her own salvation in the midst of the "confusion of experiences and stimuli which assail" her.

Once convince a Freshman class of the fact that the organizing of material for themes and the subsequent expression of that

material in sentences and paragraphs which are orderly and clear are an essential part in any young person's training for such a working out of his or her own salvation, and you will have a class which is "interested." Expository writing, though usually hard and taxing, sometimes prosaic, often discouraging, will be to its students neither dull nor conventional, but alive. It will live with their lives, their daily experiences, mental and spiritual confusions, dim intellectual awakenings, eager glimpses down long vistas of new things suddenly revealed to opening eyes. The "Gentle Theme-Reader" may lay down his dead red pencil. Peace to his ashes. Youth is life and demands life. And although, as Dr. Fitch says, "no one can fathom the heart of youth," still no one has less excuse for not trying than the teacher of Freshman composition.

[The *English Journal* hopes to publish soon Mrs. Magee's account of an experiment incidental to her work along the lines of this article.—EDITOR.]